

ISAACS AND REINCARNATION

By
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ISAACS had been warned by the European agent with whom he had closed the contract that the "Second Paganini," as Monti, the young Italian violin virtuoso, had been hailed by the foreign press, had all the vagaries of musical genius in general, with a few Latin idiosyncrasies thrown in.

"Watch him like a cat the day of the first concert," wrote Isaacs' informant. "He'll be on the verge of nervous collapse. There's no knowing when he'll whip out his hypodermic and begin squirting morphine into himself. One squirt will steady him. More than that, and he'll go to pieces. Take the needle from him even if you have to use force, or you'll never get him to the concert hall, let alone onto the stage."

The young violinist, whose exploitation in America Isaacs had undertaken, had set Italy on fire, conquered Germany, and, most remarkable of all, made London sit up and, for the moment, forget the classical traditions of Joachim. In fact, it was a London audience which had been roused to such enthusiasm that, when he tucked his fiddle under his chin and played the Paganini G-string arrangement of the prayer from Rossini's *Mosè*, it had detached the horses from his carriage and drawn him in triumph to his hotel. Moreover, Conway—James Conway, the famous English violin collector, of course—had been moved to take the famous Paganini "Strad" from his cabinet and had himself placed it in young Monti's hands, not as a gift, it is true, but as a loan for an indefinite period.

It was this episode of the Paganini "Strad," together with the popular acclamation of Monti as the "Second Paganini," and, most important of all, a certain resemblance in his photographs to the accepted likeness of Paganini himself, that had led Isaacs to consider the possible availability of the young virtuoso for an American tour. He put little faith in London musical opinion, and was aware that a virtuoso might fire all Europe without igniting a spark in America. But the "Strad," his appellation of the "Second Paganini," and a look of the great fiddler in the photographs of Monti, set him to deep and earnest thinking.

Isaacs had been a press-agent before he became a concert manager, and he still considered every enterprise, before going into it, from the press-agent's point of view.

Unless he could see a lot of good newspaper stuff in the attraction he was asked to handle, he "cut it out." But with his Baxter Street temperament and his Broadway imagination, he now had visions of himself "working the press" in a series of "stories" about the "Second Paganini" and the Paganini "Strad." Why not even go further and work the prevalent psychological fad by hinting that Monti played Paganini so well because he was none other than Paganini himself, a reincarnation of the great violinist. Any one might know this by observing and listening to him when his bow passed like a magician's wand over the strings, evoking music such as had not been heard since the mortal remains of the epoch-making master of the violin had been laid at rest in Genoa! How eagerly the great and gullible American press would take the hook if baited with such a story; properly attested and cleverly written, Isaacs knew what that meant in increased box-office receipts.

Isaacs was not one of the small fry among concert managers, whose chief function it is to "get up" debuts for aspiring, but mistaken, young men and women—chiefly women—who think they have a "call." When the notion to do something struck him, he did it quickly. Money flew. If it came back with big profits, well and good. If it flew out of sight, why good-bye, and better luck next time. This, by the way, was "next time." The long-haired pianist on whom he had banked the previous season; had not been success, which greatly puzzled the manager. All other long-haired pianists whom he had managed had made money for him. But whether Monsieur Komowski's hair had been too long, or just not long enough, Isaacs never could tell—the discriminating American public is so extremely critical of such matters. In consequence, however, his present gamble on the young Italian virtuoso represented all of the money that he had left. It was "make or break" for him.

This it was that had made the day just passed—the day of Monti's debut—the most desperate in his whole experience as a manager. He had taken his cue from the warning sent him by his European agent and had literally watched the violinist like a cat. What a day! There had been but one circumstance to relieve in any way the strain on his nerves. For on the mantelshelf, and evidently placed there by Monti himself, Isaacs had observed a print copied from the only existing daguerreotype of Paganini. It was a full length, the figure tall, emaciated, in quaintly cut clothes, a nose curved like the beak of a bird of prey, huge hands with claw-like fingers—"talons," Félix had called them—holding the violin in position, the bow poised for the stroke, truly a wonderfully vivid piece of portraiture, full of action and showing that uncanny look which all of Paganini's biographers write about at length.

"The pale, cadaverous face on which genius, sorrow and hell had engraved their lines," wrote Heine—and there it was in the daguerreotype.

It was elsewhere, too. For Isaacs noted, and chuckled to himself as he did so, that he had not been mistaken when he thought he detected a look of Paganini in the photographs of Monti. It was even quite plain to him that the young virtuoso had become aware of it and had studiously emphasized certain points of resemblance between the wizard of the violin and himself, so that the effect, even if on a slighter physical scale, at least suggested a likeness to the daguerreotype. Monti was neither as tall nor as painfully thin as Paganini has been described, but there were similarities of which he had been shrewd enough to take advantage. To begin with,

As Isaacs, beset by these doubts, looked at him, he was further alarmed by a dull, glowering light in the virtuoso's eyes, deep sunken in their sockets. It seemed as if he felt he was being watched and sullenly resented it. Suddenly Monti bounded to his feet and, darting for the mantelshelf, seized something that flashed in the light and swiftly pushing up a sleeve jabbed a needle into the fleshy part of the forearm. Before the violinist could repeat this Isaacs was upon him. But like a slippery eel he eluded the manager. Scrambling over chairs, dodging behind tables, he led the chase around the room till, as if maddened by Isaacs' determined pursuit, he suddenly

on Isaacs that the concert on which he had staked everything was going on, might indeed have been going on for some time without his knowing it, and that that weirdly beautiful note was being played by his violinist. And somehow, but how was not entirely clear to him, he no longer was in the artists' room, but had reached the curtained loggia from where, unobserved, he could see the stage and the audience.

The conductor, the orchestra were in their places, the former beating time, but both he and the players, whenever they could raise their eyes from their desks, looked in mingled awe and wonderment toward the

programme into bits and letting them flutter into the aisle beside him; young girls holding hands and gazing far into the distance the music was creating for them; a famous sculptor groping in the air with his fingers, as if striving to model what he heard; an artist who had come to sketch a portrait of the virtuoso, sitting there, his pad on his lap, his pencil poised for the stroke that never came because he was reveling in sounds that stirred his soul; the blond critic, his head bowed low, listening, listening, listening, as if he, who had followed everything in music for a quarter of a century, never had heard aught so wonderful.

All this Isaacs heard and saw like one in a trance. On and on went that marvelous violin like a voice from another world, till at last it seemed to expire in a low, half-broken sob, then a glissando of weird harmonics, as if the strings were spun moonlight kissed by the ray of a star; then the G string, the lowest note of the instrument, vibrating with the moan of a lost soul—and the music ceased.

There was a silence, one of those breathless climaxes of rapture. Then the rush of the storm—the audience beside itself with excitement bursting into an ovation, the like of which never before had been heard within the walls of the concert hall.

Overcome by this, the culminating episode of an eventful day, Isaacs staggered back into the artists' room and, weak as a child, sank into a chair. The din still kept up. Now and then it stopped and he heard the violin again—encore after encore. Then there was a mere flicker, a few sporadic handclaps, and he knew the lights had been turned down and the audience forced to disperse.

The artists' room sat Isaacs, his eyes fixed on the door. It opened and closed like a flash, and before him stood the virtuoso, lean and pale, his emaciated form in clothes of old-fashioned and eccentric cut, long talon-like hands, clutching, one the violin, the other the bow, the thin chin resting on a huge stock, the hawk-like nose exaggerated out of all proportion, the black hair draped over his head and rolling over his shoulders like a pall. Monti? No! Paganini—the living counterpart of the daguerreotype! The apparition strode toward Isaacs. It was quite close now. He felt a cold breath as if from the presence of the dead. A hand reached out and touched his face. It was like a lump of ice.

A shiver passed through Isaacs. He fought to rise from the chair. Suddenly, in the warm, brilliantly lighted artists' room, he saw the conductor, an empty glass in his hand, standing before him.

"Are you all right now, Mr. Isaacs? They wanted to send for a doctor, but I knew a dash of cold water would bring you around. I guess the excitement was too much for you. No wonder. It's been a marvelous night, marvelous!"

The room was crowded with orchestra players who were straining excitedly to wring the virtuoso's hand. Isaacs still was somewhat dazed, but the sight of the man from the box office with a big tin box in his hand restored him to his senses.

"A record house, Mr. Isaacs," said the man, "and we're sold out for the whole series!"

Just then the blond critic pushed his way through the crowd. "Isaacs," he cried out in his enthusiasm, "that story you sent us about Monti being Paganini come to life again—it's true, man, every word of it. Look at him, listen to him. I'm going to print it in the morning. By the way, I hear you've had a turn. How are you?"

"Oh, I guess I'm all right," Isaacs answered cheerfully. The big tin box, the story promised for the morning, would have raised him from the dead.

At last the excitement began to subside. The critic hurried off, followed by the conductor. The orchestra players withdrew to the nearest temple of Gambrinus.

Isaacs and Monti were alone, the latter now full of life and his eyes shining, as his manager emptied the big box and began counting the money. When Isaacs had figured up the receipts he counted off a thousand dollars, shoved the bills over to the violinist and stuffed a bigger wad into his own pocket. As he did so he felt a curious tingling sensation in the palm of



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his clothes were of old-fashioned cut, as if, in spite of his youth, he desired to date himself from a prior generation. His nose, although not so pronounced as Paganini's, was sufficiently aquiline to recall it, and it protruded prominently from a thin, pale face on which early poverty and privation had left deep lines. His fingers were long and thin, his hair was jet black, and his eyes shone with the restless, roving light of genius.

Moreover, there was a general suggestion of the uncanny about him, the best thing of all from Isaacs' point of view. For the manager recalled countless stories about Paganini, in which the violinist figured as none other than the devil himself taken to fiddling. Paganini's music—the famous "Capriccios," the "Bell" rondo, the concertos with their inexorable demand for flawless technique and purity of tone, from the deepest notes of the instrument to weird harmonics in the highest register—were the grand features of Monti's repertoire.

Yet, as a whole, the day had been a wretched one. Isaacs considered himself fairly familiar with that very uncertain thing, the temperament artistic. As a manager he had endured some curious manifestations of it, but never anything so abnormal as with Monti. He was used to the nervousness which artists exhibit on the day of their debut. The almost unvarying signs were extreme exhilaration, alternating with paralyzing trepidation, and a thousand-and-one eager questions about musical conditions in this country, American audiences, their manner of showing favor or the reverse, and the standard of American criticism. Usually, too, when the strain was at its height, a singer would relieve the tension by a series of vocal skyrockets or solfeggios, or a pianist would go to the piano and run over part of the evening's programme in fitful spasmodic fashion.

But Monti! Never in his experience had Isaacs assented at such utter dejection. It was as if the violinist had gone completely to pieces under the strain; and by the time the afternoon had worn on toward early evening, he was a wholly pitiable object. The few words he had spoken had been monosyllables, and these were in reply to questions asked by Isaacs in futile efforts to start conversation by way of relieving the cheerless situation. Thus the only satisfaction he could gain from his session with Monti was to glance from the virtuoso to the portrait of Paganini and note the resemblance. Yet even this satisfaction dwindled before the question that arose in his mind as to whether such an utterly wretched looking object as the virtuoso was at the moment could be dragged to the concert hall, to say nothing of being expected to play. His appearance hardly could be explained by anything short of a complete nervous breakdown.

turned and made a quick pass at him. Isaacs put out a warding hand, felt a sharp pin in his extended palm, and, drawing it back, found the needle sticking in it, while from behind a chair Monti regarded him with an impish leer. Angrily Isaacs drew the needle out of his hand, bent and twisted it, and threw it out of the window. After this a curious change came over Monti. From his chair he peered at Isaacs with an occasional twitching of the lips and a wink, as if he and the manager had been partners in something highly reprehensible, whereas all Isaacs had done had been to prevent an uncanny specimen of the genus virtuoso from squirming himself so full of morphine that the début, which the musical world was awaiting with such impatience, would have ended in the disgrace of a non-appearance and in bankruptcy.

There was, however, less tension in the present situation. Isaacs, even was sensible of an agreeable lassitude that began to creep over him, a feeling of relaxation which, after the exciting episode he had just passed through, diffused an atmosphere of optimism and geniality about him and even imparted a roseate hue to the room where before there had been only the glaze of the electric lamps. Monti took up his violin. Not a note from this instrument, the same from which the great Paganini had drawn magic tones, had Isaacs heard. Monti had attended no rehearsals, but had contented himself with sending to the conductor of the orchestra a copy of the accompaniment with minute directions regarding tempi and expression. Even now he simply ran his fingers over the strings—long, thin fingers, like spider's legs weaving a web of silence. Yet Isaacs seemed to hear strange harmonics, like ethereal voices calling from afar. Or were they distant chimes? And then he became aware that a clock was striking the hour at which it was imperative they should leave for the hall.

Just how they got there always remained a mystery to Isaacs. He simply found himself sitting in the artists' room, and the conductor of the orchestra was bowing out the "Second Paganini" on his way to the stage. Isaacs had an indistinct idea that he himself should be doing something, saying something—in fact, asserting himself in some way. But an inertia that positively was luxuriously reconciled him to an unaccustomed lack of authority and freedom from responsibility. The room became delightfully warm and hazy, and a delicious sensation of drowsiness crept over him. He closed his eyes. After a long, long time, and as if in a dream, it seemed to him that he heard music. It was an orchestral tutti, perhaps the prelude to one of Monti's solos. Yes! For now he heard an exquisitely clear, yet wan and pathetic note trembling on the distant air like the vox humana of a celestial organ. It slowly dawned

front of the stage. Isaacs followed the direction of their eyes, and there he saw a violin, the violin, the Paganini "Strad." Long, claw-like fingers were creeping, climbing, sliding over it. The strings, the whole body of the instrument, were in tense vibration. Through the limpid varnish—that secret which died with the last of the Cremonese masters—the exquisite tracings in the grain of the wood were visible all a-tremble, like so many nerve tendrils, under the stress of highly wrought emotion. The graceful edges of the f holes showed a faint blur, a tremor so rapid that the most delicate instrument could not have recorded it.

And from that violin there issued sounds rich, exquisite, glorious; sounds vibrant with human emotion in all its gradations, from half-suppressed sobs to cries of anguish, from first sighs of love to songs of triumph and rapture. Tone-pictures formed themselves—moonlit mountains of the North, windswept prairies of the West, sunbursts of the South, languorous twilights of the East, hanging gardens of Babylon, ocean surges pouring over the last peak of



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vanishing Atlantis, mysterious rites of long-ruined temples in forgotten jungles, pageantry of dead races, dream-women in vistas who swooned with the perfume of myriads of flowers, everything beautiful the world ever has known or dreamed of, everything, everything, everything, shaping itself in sound, only to dissolve like pictures thrown upon clouds!

And the audience! Isaacs saw women, their eyes suffused with tears; a man unconsciously tearing his

right hand. Glancing down he saw what looked like an irritated pin prick with a thin brownish circle around it.

"Monti," he said, looking at the virtuoso, "you're a great one for sure. Paganini died twenty-five years before I was born. But I've heard him to-night; yes, and seen him; seen him right here in this room. But don't you never stick no more dope needles into me again! Savey?"

Next Week, MRS ESSINGTON'S DIPLOMACY

By
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